

A Victorian Church in Edinburgh's Old Town: St Columba's Episcopal Church in Context

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An extensive archive of minute books, other papers and around six hundred letters exists concerning the foundation in the 1840s of St Columba's Episcopal Church on Johnston Terrace and the stormy ministry of the church's first rector, John Alexander.¹ Since it was deposited in Register House in 1977, the archive has been used by Rowan Strong in writing *Alexander Forbes of Brechin: The First Tractarian Bishop* and *Episcopalianism in Nineteenth-Century Scotland*, and by myself in a book with the same title as this article.² My purpose in writing the first of the articles for St Columba's church magazine on which my book is based was to put the foundation of the church of which I was a member in the context of church extension and mission to the poor, for a congregation largely ignorant (as I had been) of the social as well as the church history of mid-nineteenth-century Scotland. As I read through the material in Register House I saw that there was a second context that needed describing – the liturgical argument in the Episcopal Church over the Scotch Communion Office, and in the end I wrote seven articles, finishing with an attempt to explain how St Columba's has managed to survive when so many Victorian churches in the Old Town have closed. In this paper I describe the two motives for the foundation of the church, the missionary and the liturgical, and then suggest how far they have continued to resonate at St Columba's.

¹ The National Archives of Scotland [NAS] reference to the St Columba's archive is CH12/5.

² Rowan Strong, *Alexander Forbes of Brechin: The First Tractarian Bishop* (Oxford, 1995) and *Episcopalianism in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford, 2002); Alan Harding, *A Victorian Church in Edinburgh's Old Town: St. Columba's Episcopal Church in Context* (Edinburgh, privately printed, 2005).

Church extension and mission to the poor

Concerns for church extension and for what the Royal Commission of 1837 called “the Religious Instruction and Pastoral Superintendence afforded to the people of Scotland” particularly those of “the poor and working classes”³ were not of course peculiar to the Evangelical wing of the Church of Scotland. Thomas Guthrie acknowledged that Lord Medwyn, “the son of Forbes, the great banker”, was a “thoroughly good and devout man” even though he knew the judge to be “an extremely bigoted Episcopalian”, for the judge had persuaded his fellow directors of the Edinburgh Savings Bank to donate £1500 to the building of St John’s burgh church in Victoria Street.⁴ St John’s opened its doors in 1840. Three years later Guthrie took most of his congregation off to the Methodist Church in Nicolson Square while he planned the building of Free St John’s (Free St Columba’s since 1907), which would overlook his first church from a site between Victoria Terrace and the top of the Improvement Commissioners’ new road into the Old Town from the west, not yet named Johnston Terrace. Guthrie’s second church was completed in 1845. In the following year the Reverend John Alexander brought much of the Episcopal congregation of St Paul’s, Carrubbers Close to a new church further down the road from Free St John’s, beside the only other building as yet on its south side, the Church of Scotland’s normal school, now the Castle Rock Hostel.⁵

John Hay Forbes, Lord Medwyn, to whom Guthrie acknowledged his debt, was chairman of the trustees of the Scottish Episcopal Fund which owned St Paul’s Carrubbers Close (Old St Paul’s), the place to which Edinburgh’s original Episcopal congregation had migrated from

³ *Parliamentary Papers 1837* (31), vol. xxi.

⁴ *Antobiography of Thomas Guthrie, D.D. and Memoir by his sons D.K & C.J. Guthrie* (3rd edn., 2 vols., London, 1874), i. 402-8; Lord Cockburn wrote that Medwyn gave the “second worst” [that is anti-Kirk] judgement in the Auchterarder Case: Henry Cockburn, *Journal, 1831-1854* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1874), i. 140, 160, 169).

⁵ *Antobiography and Memoir of Thomas Guthrie*, ii, 195; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 11-19.

St Giles, in 1689. It was to him and to Dean Ramsay of St John's Episcopal Church, Princes Street, that John Muir, the treasurer of Old St Paul's, appealed in 1842, when its priest deserted his post in what at that time seems to have been little more than a decaying warehouse. Ramsay had been instrumental in founding the Scottish Episcopal Society to help "congregations struggling with pecuniary difficulties". He meant "the poor inhabitants of our Northern glens", but he seems to have been persuaded by Muir's argument that Old St Paul's served a vital function for poor Episcopalians in the city, particularly people from the Blind Asylum and soldiers and their wives from the Castle, "whose circumstances and in fact sometimes whose feelings, would very likely prevent them attending worship in any of the more fashionable Chapels".⁶ The result was the appointment as mission priest of John Alexander, an advocate for eight years before his recent ordination, who was soon proclaiming that the poor deserved a church in a site more salubrious than Carrubbers Close, and on 14 December 1843 a committee of "gentlemen connected with the Episcopal Church of Scotland" met in the Signet Library to carry forward his proposals. Its composition suggests to me that Edinburgh's New Town was acknowledging an obligation to the Old. Eight of the thirteen members were advocates, including Alexander himself; the chairman, E.D. Sandford, the son of a bishop of Edinburgh; William Forbes, Medwyn's son, and his ally Robert Campbell of Skerrington; another (John Muir) was an accountant, and the remaining two were Writers to the Signet: Charles Greenshields Reid, the secretary and treasurer of the committee, to whom we owe the fullness of the record, and William Brand, the secretary of the (Forbes's) Union Bank. Like Alexander, all lived in the New Town, and several of the key figures were members of St Paul's York Place, built in 1816-18 with Forbes money, which had drawn away the wealthier episcopalians from Old Town chapels.⁷

⁶ NAS, CH12/5/39; memoir of Dean Ramsay by Cosmo Innes in E.B. Ramsay, *Reminiscences of Scottish life and character* (22nd edn., Edinburgh, 1874).

⁷ D.M. Bertie, *Scottish Episcopal Clergy, 1689-2000* (Edinburgh, 2000); NAS, CH12/5/1 (minute book of the committee of gentlemen), 5/39 & 5/47.

Not everyone in the Old Town appreciated Alexander's initiative. In a letter to Bishop Terrot, the incumbents of St Peter's Roxburgh Street and four other Episcopal chapels protested that they too were catering for the poor. They maintained that Alexander's mission was already proving a failure: St Paul's Carrubbers close was only half full and the few poor were attracted into the church only by making attendance "an absolute condition for receiving pecuniary relief". The congregation of a new church could be formed only by offering cheap or free seats to "persons of slender circumstances" who already rented seats in existing chapels, with disastrous results for these churches' finances. There was a final charge which explains why Dean Ramsay, anxious to keep the peace in the Episcopal Church, concurred in the incumbents' protest. The new church was wanted, they said, by people attracted to Old St Paul's "from all parts by newspaper advertisements to listen to polemical discourses" on Sunday evenings, who returned to Carrubbers Close "for the sake of daily prayer and weekly communion". It was they who found it "dirty compared with Princes Street and York Place – we do not apprehend that the same fastidiousness exists in the minds of the poorer classes". Mr. Alexander's scheme would only "excite alarm and suspicion in the public mind ... as to the tendency of our church to popery". Alexander replied that he was the last person in the diocese to Romanize, but the Roman Catholics found no "difficulty in bringing their poor to well built, well ventilated and well situated Churches, why then should we Reformed Catholics?"; and that it was impossible to speak about religion to someone who did not know where to get his dinner.⁸

Unfortunately the incumbents' protest had been leaked to the media. I greatly admire Hugh Miller, the author of wonderful books like *The Cruise of the Betsey*, but his treatment of Mr Alexander helps to explain why the editor of the *Witness* thought he needed to carry a pistol to defend himself. In copious leaders, the paper held up Alexander as "the Achilles" of the Puseyite cause in Scotland, a fact proved by his

⁸ The exchange is set out in NAS, CH12/5/1.

introduction of "Daily services, – offertories, and not collections, children chaunting portions of the service"; by his talk of "our Holy Mother, the Church", or simply "the Church", as though it consisted only of Episcopalians; and by his stated anxiety "to see the Church system, as laid down in her services, canons, and rubrics fully carried out in practice". In reply Alexander asked how this could be called Puseyism – "I might as well describe any member of your Church who is anxious to adhere to its rules and regulations as being a Chalmerite" – but his letters complaining of *The Witness's* appalling "unkindness and abuse" were met by taunts that he was "a mere novice in controversy" posing as a martyr.⁹

Miller probably wounded Alexander most by the charge that he tried to convert the poor to "the system which is so thoroughly offensive to the people of Scotland" by means of "feasts spread for children" and the cruel exploitation of "men's necessities", for mission does seem to me to have been Alexander's primary motivation, and neither the attacks from outside nor the the wrangles that emerged in the committee for the new church and in the Old St Paul's vestry should hide the real work he did for the poor. At the same time that Chalmers was planning a final mission in the Old Town, accompanying it with the injunction that food and clothing should not be offered – no "lasting spiritual impression" would be made "if you mix up the character of a general almoner with that of a Christian philanthopist" – Alexander was doing just that with a fund of no more than £40 annually which had been given him by "some friends of the church" to relieve the "temporal wants" of destitute English and Irish episcopalians.¹⁰ There are thirty or so applications to the fund in the St Columba's archive, and a "West Port visitor's book" kept first by John Muir and after September 1845

⁹ *The Witness*, 1844: January 3, 6, 10 & 31; February 7; March 23; May & 11; June 22, 26 & 29; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 21-23.

¹⁰ *The Witness*, 1844, May 11, June 19 & 26, July 13 & 27; S.J. Brown, "The Disruption and Urban Poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port Operation in Edinburgh, 1844-47", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 20 (1980); Harding, *Victorian Church*, 55, 59-65.

by Charles Reid. The majority of applications are from women, allegedly episcopalian though often married to "Romanists", but *Samuel Cockburn* of College Wynd in the parish of Lady Ycster's Church may be taken to represent the eleven "original pensioners" registered on 27 September 1843. He had a certificate of church membership from the rector of Arnaduff in Leitrim, Ireland, and was said to earn an average of 3 shillings a week going around the country selling dishes, to which another shilling was added by his wife, who took sewing from the [Episcopal Church] Society along with the eldest of the four children. Cockburn's pension was set at 2 shillings a month in September 1843 and raised to 4 shillings in October, but in the summer of 1844 part of it was ordered to be withheld if the children were not more regular at school; the visitor was to tell the mother that her chronic illness was not a valid excuse, and that her daughter Eliza's "sewing at home" could not be believed.¹¹ The most frequent reason for striking off the roll, or (more often) the threat of it, was in fact the failure of pensioners to get their children to the school Alexander had opened all of three years before Thomas Guthrie's celebrated "ragged school". Intended to educate the children of the poor "as good Churchmen and useful citizens", this was for William Brand in particular at the very heart of the missionary project. The subscription book for the new church and school published in June 1844 states that "upwards of 200 children, whose parents are for the most part native of either England or Ireland, assemble for daily instruction in a small hired room in the Lawnmarket". The running costs of this "Episcopal Free School" in its first year were said to have been "little short of £200", because "qualified teachers could not be procured under salaries of £60 for the Master and £25 for the Mistress", and the parents were so poor that all books and stationery had to be supplied gratuitously.¹²

In face of the protest from the neighbouring incumbents to his plans for a new church and school building for the Carrubbers Close

¹¹ NAS, CH12/5/55.

¹² NAS, CH12/5/9 & 5/14.

congregation, Alexander staged a tactical retreat, informing the "committee of gentlemen" on 11 January that he must withdraw his scheme "for a season", whereupon the committee dissolved itself – and instantly reconvened as a committee to consider the provision of "additional Church accommodation in the Old Town". Alexander continued to spur on the project through Charles Reid, who now appears on the Old St Paul's seat-rent roll and vestry. In the first subscription list for the new church, printed late in 1844 and containing 200 names and pledges or gifts of £914, Alexander's own subscription of £100 stands out, which shows the importance of his private means to the whole project. Lord Medwyn heads the laymen on the list with a subscription of £30, and later there appear the Vice-President of the Board of Trade, the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone pledging £5, a young lawyer contributing his "first fee" (a guinea), and such well-wishers as Miss Swinburne, Capheaton, Northumberland (who subscribed £50).¹³ Gladstone's pledge and another of £50 by the Marchioness of Lothian, who was soon to become a Roman Catholic, suggest a measure of tractarian support. And passing on to Reid contributions from Oxford friends, Alexander suggested it would be prudent to leave one name out of the printed list – that of Dr Pusey, who pledged £5. But Reid's correspondents usually, like Lady Clerk of Penicuik, wrote to support the project as "a means of improving the religion and morals of the lower classes".¹⁴

John Henderson, a great builder of churches, had been engaged as architect and recommended the site on Johnston Terrace, and the financial support was now sufficient for the committee to plan to complete the building and move across the Carrubbers Close congregation at the Whitsun flitting-time in 1846. By then two things had happened. First, the argument over the Scotch Communion Office, which I will come to in a little while, had reduced the active committee

¹³ NAS, CH12/5/1, 5/9 (the subscription list) and 5/34 (301 letters to Reid as secretary and treasurer of the committee between 1843 and 1847); Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 23-5.

¹⁴ NAS, CH12/5/34, letters nos. 266, 273, 275, 276, 292, 294.

to a rump of William Forbes, Robert Campbell, William Brand and Charles Reid, who had to delve deeper into their own pockets. The second thing was a disastrous falling-out between Alexander and most of the Carrubbers Close vestrymen, for which I think the basic reason was resentment at the way that Old St Paul's had been taken over by a group from St Paul's York Place, and that Alexander and Reid assumed the removal of the congregation to be a foregone conclusion. This was exacerbated by what Lord Medwyn in a letter to Reid called John Alexander's "infirmity of temper": his treatment of the vestry was enough, wrote Medwyn in patrician style, "to irritate a set of men of much better breeding and character than many of his Vestry are", and the constitution of the new church which Reid was drawing up should not make the rector an *ex officio* member of the Vestry [which the rector of St Columba's would not be until 1930]. The successful resistance to the move by the majority of the Old St Paul's vestry meant that the Carrubbers Close premises could not be sold to provide funds for the new church. A more immediate problem was that Bishop Terrot had approved its building on the strict understanding that it was for Alexander's existing congregation, not a new one. Alexander solved this by getting 176 communicants at Old St Paul's to sign a declaration that they wished to accompany him to the new premises, and on 12 June 1846 he preached to his flock in the schoolroom under the still unfinished church, which the bishop felt obliged to license for services. Since the new church could no longer be called St Paul's, the new name was suggested by the timing of the move at St Columba's tide.¹⁵

How far was the new St Columba's a church for the poor? Its income came, of course, from the people who could pay for seats. In the front six or eight of the twenty-two pews in the nave were the seats, priced at 10s. 6d. for the half year, of the Forbeses and other professional families from beyond Princes Street and of the growing numbers of new members from the wealthy southern suburbs. Behind them, in the seven and sixpennies, sat people like Mr Edington, a Rose

¹⁵ Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 36-51.

Street grocer, Mr Lendrum, a Hanover Street bookseller, and Miss Espinasse, a French teacher; then in 5 shilling seats the de Maria sisters from Gardner's Crescent, Mr McNaught of Rose Street and Mr Croall of St Mary's Wynd, who had all rented seats at Carrubbers Close, and in 3 shilling seats Miss Piper of High School Yards, for many years the collector of subscriptions for the school, and the servants of those who sat in the front rows.¹⁶ Subscribers to the building fund had been told half the pews in the new place of worship would "be free for the poor in all time coming", but the precarious finances of the church meant that at the start the poor were allotted only thirteen of the forty-four benches in the nave, four at the back on the north side and nine at the back on the south, along with all seven in the gallery (at one Sunday service this should have been filled with school children). There was a barrage of letters to Reid from the Forbes family demanding that the two front benches on the other side of the aisle from themselves should be "free to those of the poor who from their infirmities and ignorance" were "quite unable to share in or benefit by the services in the far back seats hitherto allotted to them".¹⁷

In 1863 John Alexander wrote that for several years after the church was built children were brought from a considerable distance for baptism and confirmations, and that funerals too were frequent because St Columba's was then "the only church for the poor in Edinburgh". Quite likely the railway workers from Borthwick parish or from Fife who are recorded in the register as bringing children for baptism were Irish and many of the other ranks from the Castle who did so were English. But the great majority of the 849 *baptisms* during Alexander's twenty-six years of ministry at St Paul's Carrubbers Close and then at St Columba's were of the children of men bearing Scots names living in

¹⁶ Seat-rent lists for 1846-9 are in NAS, CH12/5/32 and another for 1855 is in CH12/5/58; five seat-rent receipt books for 1846-56 are in St Columba's church office; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 83-88, 125.

¹⁷ NAS, CH12/5/1, 5/9 & 5/32; the letters from the Forbes family about the seating of the poor are CH12/5/35, nos. 52-55 and CH12/5/45, letters dated 24 & 39 May and 3 June 1849.

the Old Town and working at every conceivable trade from basket-maker to travelling showman and horse dealer to railway guard. Seventeen of the grooms in the 108 *marriages* in Alexander's time were sergeants or privates from visiting regiments marrying women (sometimes the widows of soldiers) who were resident in the streets around the castle, though many of them had also come from distant parts, probably as domestic servants. Perhaps the 391 names in the register of *confirmations* which Alexander began to keep in 1847 is the best reflection of the regular congregation. At the beginning, wrote Alexander, "numbers of the older people had to be confirmed". Whole families of Bairds, Carmichaels, McDougalls, Moirs, Petries, Taites and Wallaces were presented for confirmation and look like some of the Scots Alexander had described in his reply to his adversaries in 1844 as "looking about for some community" in which they might "worship God in peace and quietness" after "the recent disruptions and convulsions in the Establishment".¹⁸

In June 1847 the Edinburgh Diocesan Association of the Church Society voted to license a new priest "not connected with any existing congregation" as the missionary to poor episcopalians. The vestry thereupon proclaimed the Episcopal Day School to be St Columba's Missionary School, which in 1850 was said to have 71 boys and 64 girls, the more regular and necessitous of them receiving dinner, boys and girls on alternate days.¹⁹ A sheaf of documents bundled up with the applications for poor relief already gives an indication of the school's missionary purpose – and also of the sectarian jealousies it aroused. They tell the story of Ann Edgar, an orphan living in the village of the Water of Leith [i.e. Dean village] with her aunt, who was allowed 25s. a quarter by the poor law authorities for Ann's aliment. Then early in 1848 "the inspector of children boarded out" appeared and summoned Ann to the poor house to be interviewed by a committee, which

¹⁸ NAS, CH12/5/68 for a "General Register" of statistics drawn up in 1863; the baptism, marriage and confirmation registers are in CH12/5/19, 5/20, 5/24 & 5/25; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 125-131.

¹⁹ NAS, CH12/5/42.

expressed satisfaction when she read to them but disapproval when she said that she went to the school under St Columba's Church and attended the church itself. They asked her whether she saw "idols" there – perhaps they had read the newspaper reports of the furnishings of the church at its consecration two months earlier. Though the aunt protested that Ann was now learning quickly – as she had not in the school previously paid to teach her – and received her dinner three days a week, she was ordered to bring the girl in to "be sent away to the country". The case was taken up vigorously by Robert Campbell – the latter had heard of the matter when Ann brought to his house in Alva Street some knitting done for his family – but when he and Alexander confronted them, the managers at the poor house said they thought it their duty to see children taught doctrines in accordance with their own opinions and believed that Alexander and Campbell would do likewise. However, a petition to the Board of Supervision, the creation of the 1845 Scottish Poor Law Statute, elicited a gratifying reprimand for the Edinburgh managers: there was no case for the removal of Ann from the care of her aunt they were told, and the Board expressed "entire disapprobation of any attempt on the part of the Parochial authorities to compel children ... to adopt any form of worship not in accordance with the wishes of ... parents, guardians or next of kin".²⁰

Until 1858 Charles Greenshields Reid remained the treasurer and secretary of the church and his correspondence (along with a separate collection of William Brand's) continues to be a rich source for the history of St Columba's and indeed of the wider Episcopal Church. Perhaps through the Forbeses, neighbours of Sir John Gladstone at the west end of the New Town, Reid was drawn into legal work for the Gladstones and became the first secretary of the council of the Episcopal seminary for which they provided the money at Glenalmond. He was a loyal and zealous man, vigorous in defence of the first

²⁰ For letters and papers on St. Columba's school and the case of Ann Edgar, see NAS, CH12/5/14, 5/34 (nos. 164, 195), 5/35 (nos. 10, 35), 5/39, 5/42, 5/45 and 5/55 (nos. 28-33); Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 67-72.

warden, Dr Wordsworth, in the famous scandal caused by Wordsworth's refusal of communion to Major Jelf Sharp for allowing his son to miss chapel. But in 1852 Reid was found "a very bad man of business" when a deficit of £10,000 was discovered in the college accounts and relieved of the secretaryship. At the same time he was mediating in the squabbles of St Columba's vestry and getting further and further behind in paying the church's bills. In 1857 he became bankrupt (not because of St Columba's business) and was hustled rather brutally out of St Columba's as he had been out of Glenalmond. The church chest was then returned to the rector by the official trustee of Reid's sequestered estate along with a useful inventory of its contents – the minute book of the Committee of Gentlemen, the vestry book of St Columba's, and all the correspondence and other records concerned with the church's foundation.²¹

Liturgical controversy within the Episcopal Church

This is the moment to move to the other context, since it was in 1857 that the liturgical controversy within the Episcopal Church became destructive at St Columba's, whereas in the 1840s advocacy of the Scottish liturgy, though it certainly caused trouble, gave impetus to the foundation of the church. In his life of *Alexander Forbes of Brechin*, Rowan Strong explains how the attempt to re-establish the Scotch Communion Office of 1637 (kept alive in the north-east of Scotland throughout the penal years) as the standard throughout the country caused consternation in Edinburgh and Glasgow, where the leadership of the Episcopal Church remained in the hands of clergy who were English-trained, like Dean Ramsay, even when they were not English-born, like Bishop Sandford (b. of Edinburgh, 1806-1830) and Bishop Terrot (b. of Edinburgh, 1841-1862). Clergy ordained in England asserted that the Acts of Uniformity required them to use the Book of

²¹ NAS, CH12/5/2 (the first vestry book of St. Columba's, which ends with Reid's bankruptcy; the next does not begin till 1907); letters in CH12/5/35, 5/42 and 5/45; the inventory of papers returned in 1858 is CH12/5/47; G. St. Quintin, *The History of Glenalmond* (Edinburgh, 1956); Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 82-93.

Common Prayer; and Evangelicals, whether English or Scots, disliked the Scottish office for the same reason that Tractarians were drawn to it – because it exhibited the doctrines of Eucharistic Sacrifice and Real Presence. Not content with permission for the English communion service to be retained by congregations accustomed to use it, clergy in the Glasgow diocese began to agitate for it to replace the Scotch Communion Office as primary authority.²²

St Columba's became a focus of the liturgical battle because its founders were largely from the north-east, the heart-land of Jacobite episcopalianism. John Alexander was the son of a provost of Banff and descended on his mother's side from a Jacobite executed after Culloden, had graduated from Marischal College, Aberdeen, and after starting on the profession of advocate, sought theological training in a high church college of the American Episcopal Church, which was historically linked with Aberdeen. In January 1842 he appeared as a "theological student" at the baptism²³ of his son at St Paul's, York Place, the fashionable church built in the New Town of Edinburgh with the money of the Jacobite Forbeses of Pitsligo, not far from Banff. Lord Medwyn's father, the banker Sir William Forbes, had been the dedicatee of a treatise on *The Christian Sacrifice in the Eucharist* by Bishop Jolly of Moray; and Medwyn himself argued in a pamphlet of 1846 that the Scotch Communion Office was the "National Office" of the Episcopal Church. It seems likely that an element in Alexander's appointment at Old St Paul's was a wish to make a stand for the Scottish Liturgy as it was not possible to do at York Place, where the senior minister was Bishop Terrot, English by origin and like Dean Ramsay concerned above all to keep the peace within the Episcopal Church.²⁴

²² R. Strong, *Alexander Forbes of Brechin*, chapter 1; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 30-32.

²³ Bertie, *Scottish Episcopal Clergy*; the baptismal register of St. Paul's, York Place, is ED 002/2/7 in the City Record Office.

²⁴ On Bishop Terrot, see William Walker, *Three Churchmen* (Edinburgh, 1893) and Rowan Strong in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Lord Medwyn and Mr Alexander seem, however, to have given priority to mission to the poor, and they also combined allegiance to the historic liturgy with a wariness of the Tractarian enthusiasms of some of its supporters, including the younger members of the Forbes family. John Alexander is remembered for introducing a weekly communion service at Carrubbers Close, when other episcopal churches celebrated communion only once a month, but to start with this had to be according to the English office. Then, early in 1845, Medwyn's sons William and George Forbes and Robert Campbell caused turmoil in "the Committee of Gentlemen" raising funds for the new church by offering a joint subscription of £1100, provided that within six months the English office was replaced at Carrubbers Close by "the authorized service of the Church for the administration of the Holy Eucharist". If their proposal was not accepted they threatened to withdraw from both church and committee and effect their object in some other way. The chairman, Douglas Sandford, protested that this was "an indelicate attempt to importune, bribe, or concuss the Bishop of the Diocese", and a betrayal of subscribers who intended the new church for poor English and Irish who knew nothing of the Scotch office, and that anyway what happened at Carrubbers Close was not the committee's business. The crisis was only resolved by William Forbes independently persuading the bishop to allow a limited use of the Scottish Office at Carrubbers Close.²⁵

The way in which the bishop's consent was obtained over the vestry's head was a principal cause of the rift at Carrubbers Close, and in his diary Dean Ramsay complained of the "nice mess about this Old Town business. Two different communion offices in one day in the same chapel ... I do fear the extreme and Romanizing party, and they hurt us here. The Scotch office is supposed to identify us with them ...".²⁶ Some subscribers certainly withdrew their pledges and the

²⁵ NAS, CH12/5/1 & 5/34, especially letters nos. 99, 106, 110, 116, 122, 124-5, 127, 149, 152.

²⁶ City Record Office, ED 10/14/25: the vestry minutes of St. Paul's Carrubbers Close; Cosmo Innes's memoir in Ramsay, *Reminiscences* (22nd edn.)

Committee of Gentlemen never really recovered from the storms of early 1845, but the Forbeses and their allies had plenty of support within the Episcopal Church, and the way things turned out meant they were able to set up St Columba's with an independent trust stipulating that the Scottish office was always to be used there. In 1863, John Alexander wrote that strangers regularly came to St Columba's from other congregations "to mark their approbation of the Scotch Communion Office". This would explain why some gentry families from a distance appear in the baptism and marriage registers, and perhaps why the Hon. Henry and Lady Margaret Erskine from Alloa are in the list of those confirmed at St Columba's in Lent 1850. (William Forbes's eldest daughter would marry Henry, later Earl of Mar and Kellie, a younger daughter Henry's brother, and the Forbes-Erskine alliance become influential in the life of St Columba's and of the Scottish Episcopal Church for the rest of the century).²⁷

But the argument over the Scotch Communion Office continued to divide. William Forbes and Robert Campbell should have winced in 1849 when the Scottish bishops declared that "attempts to promote the use of one office or the other by inducements of a pecuniary nature [were] deserving [of] grave censure". Dean Ramsay despaired of the trouble being caused, but his friend William Ewart Gladstone was in the opposite camp. In the autumn of 1845 Gladstone came up from Hawarden for five days entirely devoted to church affairs, discussing at dinner with Bishop Terrot what he had come to recognise as "that noble [Scotch communion] office", promoting his plan for a fund to free the Scottish bishops from the necessity of serving in particular charges, seeing "Lord Medwyn and his sons", attending services at Carrubbers Close, and no doubt talking to Henderson and Reid about the works at Glenalmond and Fasque, for both of which Henderson was architect and Reid lawyer. Gladstone's diary entry for the great day in August 1847 when Primus Skinner consecrated the chapel of St Andrew at Fasque

²⁷ NAS, CH12/5/34, letter no. 118, and 5/68; CH12/5/20 for the confirmation register.

describes the procession from the house to the church as led by "Sir John Gladstone, Bart., his youngest son [that is William himself], Sir John S. Forbes, Bart. [Medwyn's nephew who now lived close by and had accepted the office of churchwarden], and Mr. C.G. Reid, W.S., who prepared the deeds". On the eve of the consecration of Fasque, Bishop Moir of Brechin died, and as Rowan Strong relates, Gladstone began straight away to work for the election to the see of Medwyn's thirty-year old second son, at that time the vicar of a church in Leeds which Pusey had endowed to serve the urban poor. Five months later in January 1848, the new bishop Alexander Penrose Forbes preached at the consecration of St Columba's, which Gladstone might well have attended had he been in Scotland - he did attend the church when on business in Edinburgh the following October.²⁸

In 1857 the bishop of Brechin's teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist brought the liturgical controversy to a head. Memorials from leading laymen called the bishop's doctrines "repugnant to their convictions", and one of his own clergy brought a charge of heresy against him. Gladstone was alarmed at the speed with which "calm discussion which ripens and deepens opinion" had descended into "the region of definition, proscription, and their accompanying passions", and when he came up to Edinburgh on business as rector of the University, he had several meetings with William Forbes, advised the bishop on his defence - and incidentally was taken by the duke of Argyll (a fellow member of the government) to Johnston Terrace, not on this occasion to St Columba's but to listen to Dr Guthrie at Free St John's, who came, he wrote, quite up to his expectations.²⁹ At the same time the Primus, Bishop Terrot, was trying to negotiate a compromise theological formula with the bishop of

²⁸ NAS, CH12/5/42; *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. iii, ed. M.R.D. Foot and H.C.G. Matthew (Oxford, 1974), 408-9, 478-81, 643ff.; *idem*, vol. iv, 73-4; Strong, *Alexander Forbes of Brechin*, 47ff.; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 81, 98-106.

²⁹ W.E. Gladstone, *Correspondence on Church and Religion*, ed. D.C. Lathbury (2 vols., London, 1910), vol i, letter 208; *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. v, ed. H.G.C. Matthew (Oxford, 1978), 445-6; Strong, *Alexander Forbes of Brechin*, chapter 4.

Brechin through the chancellor of Brechin diocese, Alexander Forbes Irvine, the Forbes' kinsman and another member, indeed a trustee of St Columba's.³⁰

By the time Bishop Forbes was tried by his fellow bishops in Edinburgh's Freemasons Hall early in 1859 and told to be more careful in the future, St Columba's had been torn apart by a confrontation between on the one hand his family and personal friends like the vestryman Joseph Robertson (by this time the curator of the Historical Records of Scotland), and on the other hand Rector Alexander, who showed himself once again an old style High Churchman with a strong antipathy to anything that smacked of Roman Catholicism. Alexander fell in with Dean Ramsay and Bishop Wordsworth of St Andrews in publicly deploring the bishop of Brechin's teaching, and his prominence in the anti-Brechin camp is indicated by a remark of Alexander Penrose Forbes in 1864. Rowan Strong relates how some of the Scottish bishops had considered abandoning the Scotch Communion Office altogether as the only way of getting a bill removing the disqualification of clergy ordained in Scotland from holding English benefices past the predominantly evangelical bishops in the House of Lords. Gladstone described this to Pusey as "a transaction in which neither Bishops, nor Christians, nor men of honour should have a part" – if such a thing were intended, "the proper course would be ... to begin by making Esau Primus" – and helped to get the Scottish Episcopal Clergy Disabilities Removal Bill through without the sacrifice. Whereupon the bishop of Brechin wrote jokingly to his brother George: "Ewing [bishop of Argyll and the Isles] is now eligible for the see of Canterbury The Bp. Of Glasgow will immediately be made Court Chaplain with the Deanery of Windsor in commendam; but her Majesty has not yet determined what

³⁰ Another advocate, the 17th Alexander Irvine in an ancient line much intermarried with the Forbes family remained active in the affairs of St. Columba's even when he succeeded to the fine Deeside castle of Drum and became convener of the County of Aberdeen.

honour to heap on Dr Alexander". (Alexander had acquired a D.D. at the height of the controversy.)³¹

The turmoil at St Columba's appears in the correspondence of William Brand, the mainstay of St Columba's vestry after Reid's departure and a family friend of the Forbeses who nevertheless regretted the way liturgical controversy hampered the church's missionary work. In June 1858 William Forbes wrote to Brand complaining that Mr Alexander had published "very unhandsome and captious" remarks about his brother in the *Mercury*. It was very injudicious of him to stir up bad feeling in the knowledge that the principal members of his own congregation disapproved of the course he was following, and he requested that his letter be laid before a special meeting of the vestry, which he hoped would "recommend the Reverent gentlemen to confine himself to his clerical duties and not publish polemical letters in Presbyterian newspapers". Alexander must know that there was "now an association in St Andrews for the suppression of the Scottish office", and to revile those who supported the SCO was no way to defend it. Helen Forbes joined in with some bitter letters bracketing together Dean Ramsay, Bishop Terrot and Mr Alexander as the persecutors of her dear brother the bishop of Brechin. The rector's uncompromising response was to tell Brand to "make it quite clear to the Forbeses that they must not attempt" to dictate to him in any matter. After Bishop Forbes's reckless statements, those who remained loyal to the Scotch Communion Office must "let nothing pass in the newspapers without an immediate telling reply".³²

In 1869 John Alexander retired from St Columba's to live on in Rosebery Crescent for another twenty-seven years, his name not even appearing in church directories, and William Brand on whom the rector

³¹ Gladstone, *Correspondence on Church and Religion*, ed. Lathbury, vol. i. letters 210, 212-214; Strong, *Alexander Forbes of Brechin*, 186.

³² NAS, CH12/5/45; letter to Brand from William Forbes dated 10 June 1858; letters to Brand from Helen Forbes dated 28 June and 2 July and four undated from the same sequence; letters to Brand from John Alexander dated 11 & 12 June and 9 July 1858.

had increasingly relied died in the same year. The last exchanges between the two men are dispiriting. Alexander complained that the strain on his "health and nervous system" in the years of St Columba's foundation had "been aggravated twenty fold" in consequence of his determination to withstand the bishop of Brechin's misrepresentation of "the sentiments of the great Anglican Divines" on the subject of the Holy Eucharist, which had brought him nothing but "hurtful and vulgar" messages from the few individuals who had money to give, signifying that that they would no longer do so. As a consequence he insisted that St Columba's could no longer afford to support the school. Brand replied that he believed that Alexander's "former labours" were "generally admitted and appreciated". As for himself, he had "kept entirely aloof from the controversies on doctrinal matters", but on *financial matters* and the *mission work* "he did feel responsible. He would not be a party to closing the school, which would be to sever the last trace of the mission which was the purpose of the church's foundation and still aroused "the chief interest in it".³³

In fact as much as the liturgical dispute, it was the attractions of the fine church of All Saints that Rowand Anderson began to build in Brougham Place in 1866 that took away the wealthier members of St Columba's congregation. It was at All Saints that William Forbes announced that he would endow a perpetual memorial of the "great privilege" of the Scotch Communion Office, for which he had struggled "during the better part of his life"; and that his funeral was conducted in 1891 by the bishop of Aberdeen, his pall-bearers including his grandsons, the Earl of Mar and Kellie and the Hon. William Forbes Erskine. But to the end of the century and beyond Forbes and Erskine patronage remained important to St Columba's, which began to

³³ The exchanges between Alexander and Brand are in CH12/5/45, letter dated 23 February 1865; 5/74, letters nos. 9, 11, 18, 25, 26, 28, 30-35, 37-49; 5/75, letter dated 13 May 1868; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 107-121.

proclaim itself “the poorest church in Edinburgh” and vigorously resume its missionary work.³⁴

The missionary and liturgical themes in the later history of St Columba’s

How have the original missionary and liturgical motives for the foundation of St Columba’s resonated in the later history of the church? Vestry meetings in Alexander’s time had been in the New Town, and some marriages, even though of labourers from the Old Town, took place at the rector’s house in St Vincent Street. But Charles Bowden, rector from 1872 to 1888 moved into the tenement block recently completed in Johnston Terrace between Free St John’s and St Columba’s, and took up the missionary task among the poor in earnest. The Post Office Directory lists no. 11 Johnston Terrace (where Bowden and his curates lived) as St Columba’s Mission House and no. 8 as “St Columba’s Church Depot”, and at no. 13 (immediately across the steps from Victoria Terrace at the east end of the church) there appears the Guild of St Giles, the premises of which included a reading room and the office of the St Giles Printing Company (chairman, the rector). From there was started the Episcopal Church Directory, the precursor of the Year Book, which tells us more about a “Home for Poor or Aged Women, and for Little Children” established at no. 7 Johnston Terrace: this was the mother house of the Sisterhood of Holy Charity, one of the religious communities for women which Alexander Penrose Forbes had worked to reintroduce to Scotland, and in its first four years it was reported to have provided shelter for seventy children. The resident members of the Order and their “external associates” were also said to undertake the care of St Columba’s, the superintendence of the school, the visitation and relief of the poor, and the use of a Working Women’s Mission-Room.³⁵

³⁴ NAS, CH12/91/21 (All Saints Vestry Book); *The Scottish Standard Bearer*, ii. 91-2 (May 1891) with a photograph of Forbes; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 132-6.

³⁵ *Post Office Directories; The Episcopal Church Directory*; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 137-146.

Bowden acknowledged the support given by the Forbes family in his work in Edinburgh and at a mission-church started in Penicuik (Lord Forbes of Castle Forbes became active in St Columba's affairs at this time), but eventually he pronounced himself exhausted and in 1887 exchanged charges with Herbert Flower, the incumbent of a mission church founded at Glencarse in Brechin diocese in the last years of Bishop Forbes. Flower was a Wiltshire man who first appears in Scotland as a lay reader in Aberdeen and had married the only daughter of Colonel Henry Knight Erskine of Pittodrie (a neighbour of Lord Forbes), whose money seems to have been essential to a ministry at St Columba's which lasted till 1925. The Flowers were the first occupants of the house at the Castle Esplanade end of Patrick Geddes's newly-developed Ramsay Garden, which the Post Office Directory for 1895-6 begins to list as "Pittodrie House".³⁶ No personal dealings have been discovered between Rector Flower and the visionary biologist, educationalist, sociologist and town-planner, whose Edinburgh Social Union promoted "artistic" evening classes in the Castlehill Board School just over the road from St Columba's. But it is intriguing that Geddes was fascinated by St Columba the man, and campaigned to have a statue of him placed at the head of the Lawnmarket, near "the very spot where [he was persuaded] Columba may most probably have preached". It was needed, said Geddes, "to unite the separate yet kindred denominations whose three Assemblies met round about", and renew their "sympathy with the many churches and centres of good will and fellowship not far away". This was written, of course, after the arrangements of 1907 which changed Free St John's into another St Columba's – something of which the records of Episcopal St Columba's show absolutely no awareness.³⁷

³⁶ *S. Columba's Church Magazine* (monthly sheets bound up with issues of *The Banner of Faith*, a London church extension periodical, still held in the church), April 1887, August and September 1888; *Post Office Directories*, 1893-4 & 1894-5; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 157-9.

³⁷ P. Geddes, *The Masque of Ancient and Medieval Learning* (Edinburgh, 1913) and V. Branford, *St Columba: A Study of Social Inheritance and Spiritual*

St Columba's day school had finally closed in the 1870s as a school became established at All Saints, but this allowed the schoolroom to become a true church hall, serving the local community in many other ways. The activities of the Sunday School, which increased from 40 children in 1878 to 200 in 1894, drew many families into the church. Approximately 2000 of the 6000 baptisms at St Columba's in the 160 years of its existence were in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and 400 of the 1300 confirmations. The majority of those confirmed were adults, two thirds of these female, very often mothers who had brought their children for baptism, too often quickly followed by burial, or for admission to the Sunday School. Strikingly, a mere 180 of the 641 confirmed at St Columba's between 1889 and 1914 had been baptized there – and in a significant number of these cases it was immediately before confirmation. The register shows that around 150 had been baptised at other Episcopal Churches, 150 as “Established Presbyterians” (e.g. at St John's Victoria Street), 54 as Free Presbyterians (e.g. at Free St Columba's, when it was in Cambridge Street), 20 in the United Presbyterian Church, 2 in the United Free Church and 25 as Roman Catholics.³⁸

To the end of his ministry Flower claimed for his church a membership of some 850 souls, but there was a sharp decline in attendance during the Great War and a steady decline thereafter. Reported membership of 400 in 1931 (200 of them communicants and 70 children in the Sunday School) had become 161 in 1948 (116 of them communicants, 15 children). Part of the decline is to be attributed to the movement of population: in the early 1930s a diocesan committee on home mission was already reporting that attention needed to shift to Craigmillar, Duddingston and Niddrie, if the Episcopalian residents of those areas, newly-built to accommodate people from condemned

Development (Edinburgh, 1913); entries on Geddes and Branford in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 163-4, 195.

³⁸ *The Scottish Guardian*, 1896, 677 for the building of the internal stair between church and hall; the Confirmation Register is in CH12/5/83; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 164-5.

property in the city centre, were not to be lost to the church. Two Episcopal mission churches in the Old Town, St Andrew's, Holyrood Road, and St Michael's, Hill Square, would eventually close, and when Frederick Gray, the rector of St Columba's (and incidentally Flower's son-in-law) became mortally ill in 1948, the bishop came to the conclusion that our church should close also. But after appeals from the congregation it was given a last chance by the appointment of the Rev. Eric Kemp to be the incumbent of St Columba's as well as Director of the Industrial Christian Fellowship for the diocese.³⁹

Kemp saved the church partly by his creative use of it as a base for ICF activities and at the Edinburgh Festival season, but chiefly by his enthusiasm for liturgical renewal. Memory of the nineteenth-century liturgical argument had long since faded. When it was decided in 1930 to revise the original constitution of St Columba's, the church's solicitors asked (remarkably) whether the committee that approved it still existed, for they found that it had stipulated that "the Scottish Office then in use was never to be changed" – to which the vestry replied that it knew of no records from that time. What Kemp did was discontinue 8 a.m. services on a Sunday (at which most people had taken communion) and also the 11 o'clock sung service (at this the organist resigned), in order to bring the whole of the small congregation together at a 10 o'clock Eucharist. And in 1951 he got the vestry's consent to the bringing forward of the altar from the east wall so that the liturgy could be celebrated with the priest facing the congregation, and the removal of part of the chancel screen so that the people could see what was enacted in the sanctuary. Peter Hammond's book on *Liturgy and Architecture* was soon hailing St Columba's as "the focal point for liturgical renewal" in the Scottish Episcopal Church. The turning point

³⁹ NAS, CH12/5/3 & 5/82 (Vestry Books for 1907-36 & 1936-76); CH12/5/ 22, 5/26 & 5/83 (the Registers); Alexander Forbes Irvine, the last of the original trustees, had apparently transferred the records to the diocese along with the trust before his death in 1892: a few months after the vestry said they did not exist, the diocesan registrar returned them to the church; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 196-209.

in the church's fortunes came when Anglican students at the University, whose numbers had outgrown their chaplaincy, chose St Columba's as the place where they could take communion together. Young families, often of members of the university staff, arrived to supplement a core of staunch "old Columbans" and a dying "territorial" church was revived as a "gathered" church.⁴⁰

Edinburgh

⁴⁰ NAS, CH12/5/82 & 5/83; Harding, *A Victorian Church*, 213-224.